

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE
for the
Mt. Haggin WMA Habitat Project #4
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 3, Bozeman
December 2017

Proposed Action and Need

The enclosed Decision Notice has been prepared to for the Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to treat approximately 1,500 acres on the Mt Haggin Wildlife Management Area (WMA) for conifer encroachment. The total gross project area is 6,600 acres delineated into 6 treatment units, ranging in size from 65 to 646 acres. Conifer would be removed from grasslands and sagebrush shrublands, aspen stands and willow-dominated riparian areas. Untreated areas would consist of mature forest stands and grass/shrublands, aspen and riparian areas not invaded by conifer expansion. This would mainly be a non-commercial harvest with a small component of commercial harvest of merchantable timber removed from aspen stands. Conifer to be removed includes primarily 30-40-year-old lodgepole pine and Douglas-fir. Treatment in non-commercial areas would include hand-removal methods, with slash being either lopped and scattered or piled and burned. Commercial cuts would include the use of heavy machinery and temporary skid trails. No new roads would be created for this project.

Mt. Haggin WMA was purchased in 1976 for its values to wildlife and habitat. Because of its large intact acreage (almost 60,000 acres) that spans the continental divide, it provides both summer and winter range to several big game species including mule deer, elk, moose and antelope. Photo comparisons from the 1970's to 2010's reveal a large amount of conifer expansion into sagebrush shrublands, grasslands, aspen and riparian areas on the WMA. Loss of these important habitat types are occurring throughout SW Montana, mainly due to fire suppression, climatic conditions, and other factors. If left unchecked, conifer expansion could impact the big game populations that depend on sagebrush, grasslands, aspen and riparian areas on Mt Haggin WMA for calving/fawning, summer weight gain, and winter survival, along with other wildlife species such as songbirds and small mammals. This proposal would ensure critical habitats remain functional and productive into the next fifty years.

Public Process and Comments

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on November 3, 2017. The public was notified that this EA was available for review and comment as follows:

- Direct mailing to adjacent landowners, Deerlodge County, Silver Bow County, BLM, Forest Service, and other interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project
- Distribution via the FWP Butte Area Wildlife Biologist's email list of interested parties
- Two public notices each in *The Montana Standard* (Butte) and *The Anaconda Leader* (Anaconda).
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.

Copies of the draft EA were available for public review at FWP Region 3 Headquarters and at the FWP Butte Area Resource Office. Public comments on the proposed action were taken for 30 days (through December 4, 2017).

Six comments were received on this proposal. All were in support of the proposed action, with some suggestions (Table 1). FWP's response to comments are in **bold** in Table 1.

FWP thanks all parties that took time to provide comments to the Mt Haggin WMA Habitat Project #4 proposal.

Table 1: Summary of comments received on the Mt. Haggin WMA Habitat Project #4 proposal.

PARTY	FROM	SUPPORT or OPPOSE	COMMENTS
FWP	Internal	Support	<p>To minimize incidental take of migratory birds and/or occupied nests (ground and tree) during projects such as conifer removal, it is recommended that work not occur during the nesting period April 15-July 15.</p> <p>FWP response: The local wildlife biologist and FWP Forester will comply with this recommendation when implementing the project.</p>
Individual	Butte	Support	<p>“I am a strong supporter of forest management.”</p> <p>“My biggest concern for these projects is adequate hiding/security cover for mule deer in sagebrush areas where conifer is removed.”</p> <p>“Vanna has taken a careful approach on this project and with no new roads to remove trees makes it more desirable.”</p> <p>“I recommend follow up monitoring to evaluate mule deer and elk use of the area. Permanent photo plots would be helpful before and after the treatment.”</p> <p>FWP response: FWP shares this individual’s concern over leaving ample security/hiding/thermal cover for mule deer. In Treatment Area 1 which is mule deer and elk winter range, dense clusters of Douglas fir trees will be retained within sagebrush and grassland stands for this purpose while scattered trees will be felled.</p> <p>Regarding monitoring the effects of the treatment, FWP annual aerial big game surveys will be used, along with ground surveys, to assess big game use of the treated areas. In addition, permanent photo plots established in the mid-1970’s have been used to identify treatment areas and will continue to be used annually to measure change in vegetation over time.</p>
Individual	Wise River	Support	<p>“Any marketable trees should be removed where possible.”</p> <p>“Lopped and scattering slash...should be kept to a minimum as slash in this dry environment takes a long time to decompose. The exception should be where slash is left in areas where it is used as a filter mat to prevent or reduce erosion.”</p> <p>“I agree with removing the encroachment and promoting aspen.”</p> <p>“In open sagebrush areas, leaving small groups of trees for security cover is good and leaving a few large diameter trees for raptors to perch on and use by other birds is good.”</p> <p>“Any work in Areas 5 & 6 should be delayed until after the elk calving season as I see this area used a lot by elk during calving.”</p> <p>“Any ATV trails created when hauling in equipment need to be obliterated otherwise they will end up being used by the motorized public.”</p> <p>FWP response: FWP plans on removing marketable trees as part of a commercial sale where it is economically practical and logistically feasible. Otherwise, the focus of this proposal is on noncommercial conifer reduction.</p>

			<p>Slash generated from tree removal will be kept to a maximum of 18". Where slash exceeds that, it will be piled and burned or used as erosion control or to close of temporary trails created by this project.</p> <p>Regarding security cover, see FWP comment above. These retained trees will serve as avian perches, as well.</p> <p>FWP agrees with the timing of work in Areas 5 & 6 relative to elk calving in those areas. In fact, implementation of work in all treatment areas will occur when it minimizes disturbance to wildlife with attention paid to how wildlife uses that area (nesting, calving, wintering, etc). In addition, work will occur in one treatment area at a time to minimize disturbance spatially as well.</p>
Individual	Twin Bridges	Support	"I feel that encroachment trees can be considered 'weeds' when they crowd out grasslands, shrubs, willows, and other valuable flora. I see no negatives in this project. I would urge you to pursue this project and by all means make it happen!"
Anaconda Sportsmen Association	Anaconda	Support	"We believe this would enhance the WMA's habitat which was badly abused last century and improve the open spaces that elk need."
Skyline Sportsmen Association	Butte	Support	"Encroachment of conifers is seriously reducing the amount of forage available to our wildlife in many areas of Montana. This project is going to reverse this trend in a portion of the Mt. Haggin WMA. Hopefully more such projects can be done in other areas where needed."

Final Environmental Assessment

The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment and public comment, it is my decision to approve the proposed action to treat approximately 1,500 acres on the Mt Haggin Wildlife Management Area (WMA) for conifer encroachment, pending Fish and Wildlife Commission approval.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

December 8, 2017

Mark Deleray
Region 3 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Date